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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ASEAN](#) [BM](#) [ID](#)  
SUBJECT: AMB. REES RAISES RAPE IN BURMA WITH ASEAN SYG ONG

REF: A. A) STATE 20000

[1](#)B. B) JAKARTA 429

Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER SANJAY RAMESH FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On Feb. 19, Special Representative for Social Issues, Amb. Grover Joseph Rees, conveyed the USG concern over Burma's use of rape as an instrument of policy to ASEAN Secretary-General (SYG) Ong Keng Yong. Amb. Rees pushed for ASEAN support of a UN Human Rights Council (HRC) resolution on Burma, and asked ASEAN to press the Burmese junta to stop this intolerable practice. Ong believed ASEAN could have some influence over Burma, and promised to try to get leaders to focus on the issue. He continued, however, that ASEAN always acted by consensus, reducing its ability to be tough. Courted by both China and India, Burma acts as if it could do without ASEAN. Nevertheless, Ong suggested several useful approaches to influence the regime, including raising rape in the ASEAN Senior Officials' Meeting, and engaging the ASEAN Conference on Women and the ASEAN Social Welfare and Development Committee. End Summary.

Delivering the Message  
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[1](#)2. (C) On February 19, Special Representative for Social Issues, Ambassador Grover Joseph Rees, told ASEAN SYG Ong that Burma and Sudan are the only two countries whose governments systematically use rape as an official instrument of violence exclusively against vulnerable minorities. The Burmese junta used rape to oppress, demoralize, and control restive minorities. Pointing out that a "gradual roadmap approach" and incremental measures such as strengthening the justice system or law enforcement were totally insufficient to stopping rape in Burma, Amb. Rees urged ASEAN to take action to push the Burmese junta to stop this gross violation of human rights. He noted that though the recent UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution censoring Burma had failed to pass, it received nine of fifteen votes, and that all the UNSC members acknowledged the problems that existed within Burma. He said the USG would provide SYG Ong with several credible reports documenting widespread rape targeted at minorities such as the Karen, Shan, and Chin.

ASEAN focused on "grand strategy"  
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[1](#)3. (C) Ong said that "no one in ASEAN condones institutional rape." While Ong believed that ASEAN needed to act quickly on such reports, he regretted that with regard to Burma, ASEAN leaders tended to focus on "the strategic level, without ever getting into the details." In the past Ong had tried, without much success, to get ASEAN leaders to focus on pressing human rights issues in Burma such as forced labor and HIV, but discussion "always remained stuck at the

strategic level of the roadmap." Ong also said that ASEAN's ability to decisively tackle controversial issues was limited by its institutional mandate to proceed by consensus. Ong noted that while in theory the SYG did not have the ability to place items on the ASEAN agenda, he would do his best to get leaders "to focus on this issue by whispering in a few important ears."

ASEAN "flabbergasted" by Burmese regime  
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¶4. (C) Ong told Ambassador Rees that ASEAN was often "flabbergasted" by the Burmese regime's attitude that "they could easily do without ASEAN." He attributed this to China and India's courtship of Burma without regard to human rights violations and lack of democracy. As a result, Burma was really focused on its bilateral relationship with these two countries. ASEAN was trying to get China and India to help promote change "at least in functional areas such as education or disease control because even in these areas the Burmese government does not engage with ASEAN." Ong argued that the Chinese and Indian role in Burma and reluctance to push for change significantly reduced ASEAN's leverage over the regime.

SYG suggests tactics to influence Burma  
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¶5. (C) Ong believed that an HRC resolution would not hurt Burma because the junta "already believed the HRC was politicized and unfriendly." Rather, he recommended that the USG engage other unspecified UN bodies to focus on rape in Burma. Ong also suggested that the ASEAN senior official meeting, composed of foreign ministry directors-general, was a potentially useful forum in which to try and raise the

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issue. He advised the USG try to approach the ASEAN Conference on Women and ASEAN Social Welfare and Development Committee to consider rape in Burma because ASEAN dialogue partners - including Japan and South Korea, countries with influence over Burma - actively participated in these bodies.

Ong noted that a few years ago ASEAN had passed a declaration on violence against women and children, which could possibly be used as a basis to raise the rape issue in these bodies. Despite his earlier assertion on the limits of ASEAN influence, Ong said "I still believe we can get somewhere if we in ASEAN focus on this issue."

¶6. (C) In addition to working through international organizations like the UN or ASEAN, Ong also advised the USG to raise rape with Burma parliamentary caucus groups in Asia.

He noted that many Asian parliaments included such caucuses which were deeply concerned about the dismal state of human rights in Burma. Another useful strategy, he suggested, involved collaborating with international and regional human rights NGOs to embarrass the Burmese junta. He noted that the Burmese regime had taken some positive steps to address child labor due to pressure from the International Labor Organization (ILO) and civil society.

¶7. (U) This message has been cleared by Ambassador Rees.

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